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AN ALBINO TARPON, *TARPON ATLANTICUS*, THE ONLY KNOWN SPECIMEN

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One of the most beautiful and interesting specimens, which has of late come to the American Museum, is a mounted albino tarpon, the gift of Mrs. Olivia Erdmann Kuser of Titusville, New Jersey. It has been placed in the Hall of Fishes, where it has attracted much attention. It was caught on May 20, 1936, by Mrs. Kuser in Boca Grande Pass, between Boca Grande and Cayo Costa Islands, west coast of Florida, north of Fort Myers. Seeing that it was a most unusual specimen, Mrs. Kuser, who is a member of the Museum, had it mounted, and has presented it for display in the Hall of Fishes.

This specimen of *Tarpon atlanticus* was taken with ordinary tarpon tackle and it behaved as an ordinary tarpon does when hooked. Not until it was brought up to the side of the boat was it seen that it was an unusual specimen. When it was noticed that it was an albino, instead of being gaffed, it was brought in by hand and carefully handled so that it might be a perfect skin for the taxidermist. Mrs. Kuser telegraphed me at once, and eventually this unique mounted specimen reached the Museum.

When caught, the fish weighed 27 lbs., but no measurements were recorded. Now the mounted fish measures 3 ft. 9 in. from tip to tip, and its depth is 9 in. Except in color, it is in all respects a normal medium-sized tarpon. In the process of skinning and degreasing the skin before mounting, the original slight pinkish color largely went out. However, the captor made careful color notes while the fish was fresh and after the mount reached the Museum, she brought these notes to our Department of Preparation and carefully supervised the skilled artist who colored the fish under her critical supervision.

That the reader may get a better idea of the beautiful coloration of this specimen, comparison must be made with a normal fish. Such is to be seen in Fig. 1 made from a photograph of a splendidly mounted tarpon hanging on the eastern wall of the Hall of Fishes. Here the huge scales are a brilliant silver. From this comes one of the names of the tarpon—the silver king. And the living fish in the clear waters of southern Florida justifies its name, for it is truly a regal fish. Note that in

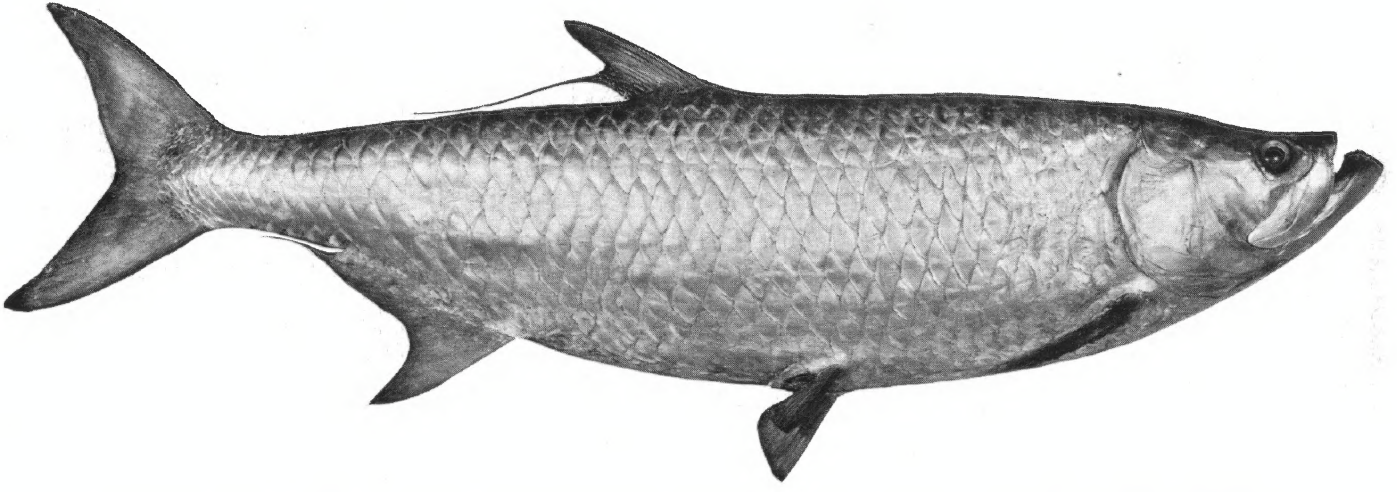

Fig. 1. Photograph of a mounted normal tarpon, *Tarpon atlanticus*, on the eastern wall of the Hall of Fishes in the American Museum.

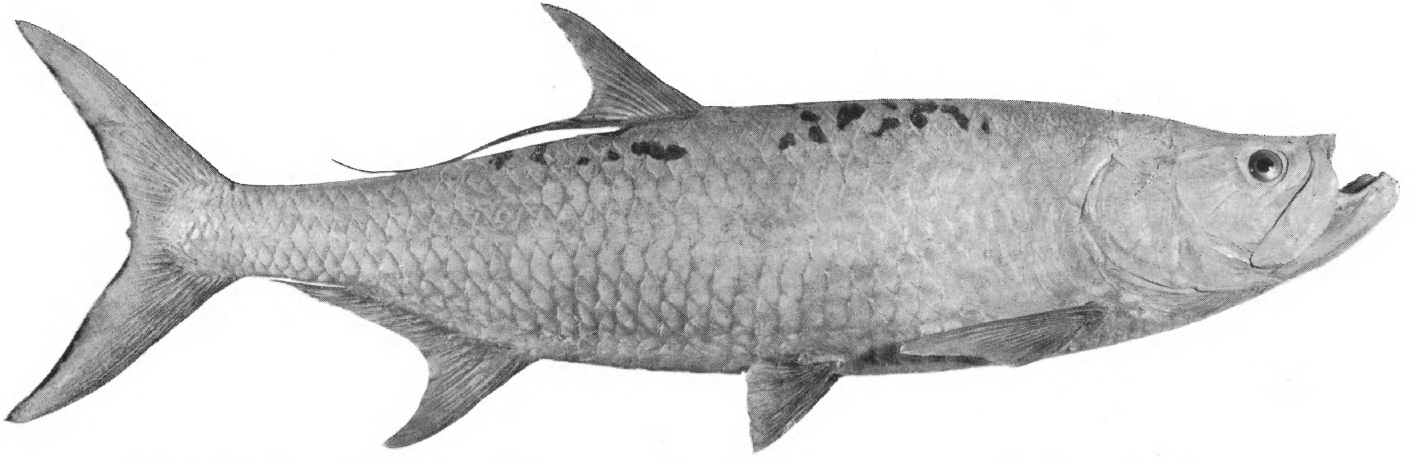

Fig. 2. Photograph of the mounted albino tarpon, hanging on the western wall of the Hall of Fishes in the American Museum.

Fig. 1, the under surface is almost white, the back almost black and the fins hardly less so.

As Fig. 2 shows, the specimen being described is an albino. It is white with pink or reddish eyes. But when examined in a good light it is seen to have an underlying very faint yellow-gold tint with a suggestion of orange-red stippling. The orange-red color becomes somewhat stronger on the head and especially on the branchiostegals. This stippling is also seen to grow slightly denser as one's eye travels toward the mid-dorsal region. Here, where in the normal living fish the color is a metallic purplish-blue or black, there are found a number of black patches, each covering a part of a white scale or spreading over parts of two or more scales. The situation here is just what one finds in some goldfish with black spots on the dorsum. The fins are orange-red, markedly so at their bases. The color diminishes toward the edges, which were transparent in life. But, even considering all these minor things, this tarpon is a true albino. The faint coloring just described is not apparent in the photograph, which shows only the black patches.

In the animal kingdom, albinism is an infrequent but by no means unknown phenomenon. Albinos are found in all the divisions of the vertebrata from man to fish. There are albino races in mammals and in fishes, in white rats and in white trouts. In fishes generally, albinos are more common in the salmonid and flatfish groups. In the first group, they are found among young fish in hatcheries and are segregated and raised and bred as curiosities. In the case of flatfishes, these are trawled in great numbers and since the flatfishes have flat wide bodies, a specimen devoid of color catches the eye very readily. Of the fourteen albino fishes distinctively recorded in Dean's 'Bibliography of Fishes,' three or one-fifth are flatfishes.

I have been working on abnormal fishes for 10 years. This fact has become pretty well known and all kinds of abnormalities have been reported to me from the eastern half of the United States, and so many specimens have come in that I have had a special tank built to store these teratological fishes. But in all this time, this is the first real albino fish to come to me.

This fish is unique. No albino tarpon is recorded in the 'Bibliography of Fishes' (1914) and, so far as I know, none has been listed since. Nor indeed has albinism been described for any of the tarpon's close kindred —for any fish in the herring tribe. These facts make our specimen all the more interesting and valuable.

The cause of albinism is a mystery. It is a congenital phenomenon. An albino is born with a lack of the coloring matter, the chromatophores, in the skin. Our albino tarpon hatched out of the egg an albino.